THE FORGED™

RUCKA · TRAUTMANN · HENDERSON · WOODARD · MAHER

image

ISSUE 008

IN THE CLUTCHES OF THE DEATH-DEALING PHOBES!
MALEVOLENT MACHINATIONS REVEALED!
VICTORY MUST LIVE!

HENDERSON '23

THE FORGED™

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For centuries, all of known space has been
the realm of **Her Eternal Majesty, the Empress.**

Elite teams of soldiers, **THE FORGED**, serve Her
with fierce loyalty and total determination. Cloned from
the Empress's genetic template, these women–armed and armored with
devastating weaponry and technology–are the ultimate
extension of Imperial will.

The FORGED team designated **SCIMITAR-3**–comprised of
team leader **VICTORY**, heavy weapons specialist **CRAZYJO**, combat
engineer **HAP**, medic **PUSHER**, and sharpshooter **HARPO**–made humanity's
first contact with a terrifying new threat, **THE PHOBES**, an alien species
native to interdimensional transit space, or **T-SPACE**. The Imperial
starfortress that delivered them to that mission was lost with all hands,
including one of the Empress's corps of clairvoyants, a **CASSANDRA**. The
presence of a Cassandra so far out into Hinterspace is unheard of, let alone
involved directly in a military operation.

This mystery has not gone unnoticed.
GENERAL DAVIAN, the Empress's chief spymaster, has been drawn into the
affair, paying close attention to Scimitar-3's team leader, uncovering a plot
against them from within the halls of power. What his next move will be
remains unknown.

As the conflict with the Phobes grows, Vic and her team are dispatched to
conduct **OPERATION: ABADDON**–a reconnaissance-by-fire mission in a
far-flung sector of space, the **SKULL NEBULA**. With them are two other
FORGED teams–**GLADIUS-6**, led by the cold and ruthless **VIPER**, and
RAPIER-9, commanded by **SCYTHE**.

On their first sortie, the FORGED uncovered a bizarre alien-constructed
planetoid–purpose unknown. Naval command, convinced the construct was a
powerful weapon, ordered its destruction, and an all-out FORGED assault was
launched into the teeth of a strong Phobe defense. During pitched battle, Vic
was separated from her team and swarmed by Phobes.

She is now considered **MISSING IN ACTION...**

COLONIAL ZONE FG-271,
ANOMALOUS EXCLUSION
ZONE JERICHO ALPHA

"THE SKULL NEBULA"

T-SPACE EMERGENCE DETECTED.

FORGED SCIMITAR-3 TRANSPONDER AND IFF CODES VERIFIED.

HEM 132009,
ADAMANT PURPOSE,
ON STATION

FORGED, YOU ARE .21 OFF YOUR PREDICTED EXIT POSITION.

ADAMANT PURPOSE REDIRECTING TO REVISED RECOVERY ZONE.

FORGED, BEGIN BOARDING PROCEDURE.

ADAMANT PURPOSE FLIGHT CONTROL WELCOMES YOU HOME, FORGED.

SCIMITAR-3 ALPHA IS ABSENT FROM ROSTER.

WE SALUTE HER GLORY.

STOW YOUR ARMOR AND REPORT TO COMMAND DECK FOR MEDICAL REVIEW AND DECONTAMINATION.

TELL ME WE'VE GOT VIC'S LAST POSITION.

WE'VE GOT TO GET BACK OUT THERE.

NOT NOW, PUSHER.

WE CAN'T JUST LEAVE HER OUT THERE...

I'VE GOT OUR COMPLETE SENSOR TAKE COMPRESSED AND READY TO TRANSMIT TO THE SHIP'S TAC COMPUTERS, I CAN PUSH IT THROUGH THE SYSTEM'S GATEKEEPING TIERS, MAYBE FUDGE AUTHORIZATION FOR AN IMMEDIATE RESCUE OP--

NO, HAP.

BAD ENOUGH WE LOST OUR BOSS. PISSING OFF COMMAND WON'T HELP.

RAD LEVELS ARE .7 ABOVE NORMAL--

--STILL WITHIN TOLERANCES--

--GET 'EM MOVING, FORGED, DECONTAMINATION BAY 2, DECK 7--

--HAND ME THE DERMAL SCANNER--

--GOT SOME MINOR FLASH-BURNS FROM THE T-SPACE TRANSITION--

--THIS ONE'S GOOD TO GO--

FUCK.

FS3-ALPHA

VICTORY

WE'LL FIND YOU, BOSS.

THEY'LL CLEAR A RESCUE OP.

THEY HAVE TO CLEAR A RESCUE OP.

ROUGH MISSION, HUH?

WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT?

MAYBE ***HUG*** IT OUT? HAVE A GOOD ***CRY?***

YOU DON'T SEEM LIKE THE HAIR-BRAIDING TYPE, BUT HELL, I'M GAME IF THAT'S WHAT ***YOU*** NEED IN THESE ***VERY*** TRYING TIMES.

YOU DON'T WANT MY HANDS ANYWHERE NEAR YOUR FACE RIGHT NOW, VIPER.

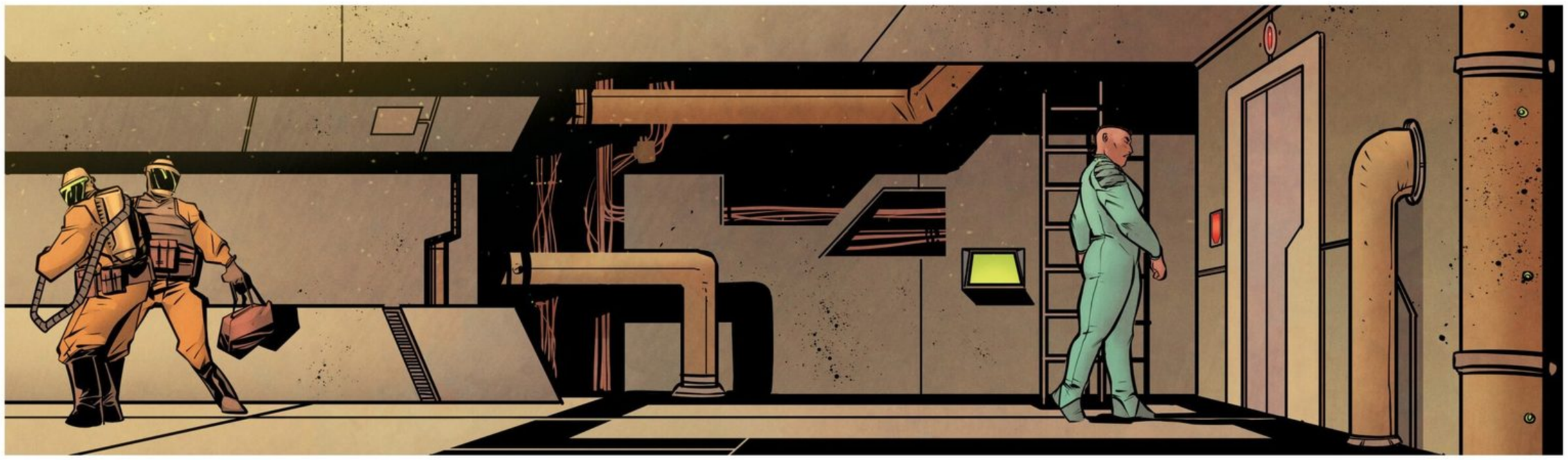
TSK TSK

I'M THE ***SENIOR*** TEAM ALPHA IN ***ZONE***, JO. LIKE IT OR NOT, YOU WORK FOR ME NOW.

YOU WANT TO TAKE A RUN AT ME, BE MY GUEST, BUT IT'LL END WITH YOUR CAREER IN ***RUINS***, YOUR TEAM ***SPLIT UP***, AND YOU WITH A PERMANENT ***LIMP*** TO REMEMBER ME BY.

FINISH YOUR POUT AND REPORT FOR DEBRIEFING, ON THE FUCKING DOUBLE.

YOU'RE SCIMITAR-3'S ***ACTING*** ALPHA NOW, WHICH MEANS YOU NEED TO ***ACT LIKE THE FUCKING ALPHA.***



IDENTSCAN VERIFIED, FS3-BRAVO.
AMEND: FS3-ALPHA, PROVISIONAL.
KLAK

KLAK

...FLASH THE UPLOAD BACK TO THRONE?

PRIORITY MARK IT FOR THE TECHNION ANALYSIS.

FS3-BRAVO...

...REPORTING.

AT EASE, FORGED.

YES, MA'AM.

HAP AND PUSHER DID AN EXCELLENT JOB COLLECTING THE REQUIRED DATA, GIVEN THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

IT'S ALREADY BEEN SENT TO THE WAR COUNCIL, WITH THE PRELIM AFTER-ACTION.

THANK YOU, MA'AM...

WAS THERE SOMETHING SPECIFIC YOU NEEDED?

YES, MA'AM.

PERMISSION TO TAKE SCIMITAR-3 OUT TO SEARCH FOR FS3-ALPHA.

DENIED.

CAPTAIN, SHE'S OUR **ALPHA**, WE'VE--

DENIED.

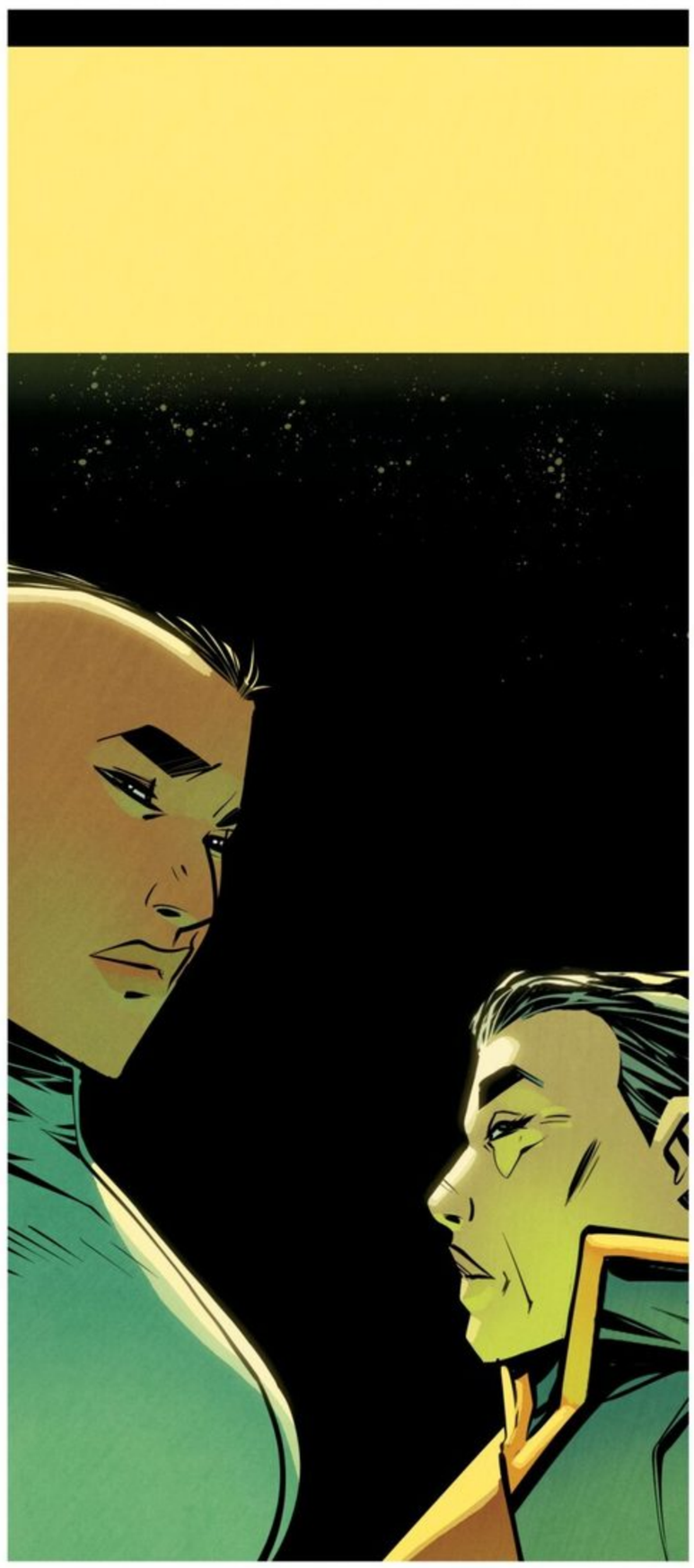
--GOT TO TRY, EVEN IF SHE **ISN'T** STILL **ALIVE**--

GODSDAMMIT, JO--

--AT LEAST RECOVER HER **BODY**--

--I SAID **DENIED!**

WE'RE AT WAR, CRAZYJO. I CANNOT EXPEND RESOURCES ON SYMPATHY.
I WILL NOT SPEND LIVES ON SENTIMENT.
IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?



YES, CAPTAIN.
VERY GOOD.
YOU'RE ACTING ALPHA FOR YOUR TEAM, NOW. REPAIR, RE-ARM, AND BE READY TO RE-DEPLOY IF CALLED UPON.
DISMISSED.

THRONEWORLD

IMPERIAL PALACE

WAR ROOM

MY ETERNAL, FELLOW MEMBERS OF THIS ESTEEMED COUNCIL OF WAR...

...WE HAVE JUST RECEIVED WORD FROM *ADAMANT PURPOSE.*

THE SECOND INSERTION HAS BEEN SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED.

BRAY VII IS NOW IN POSSESSION OF ALL ACQUIRED TELEMETRY AND DATA...

...AND TECHNION ANALYSIS HAS COMMENCED.

BRAY VII ESTIMATES SIX HOURS BEFORE THEY ARE PREPARED TO PRESENT THEIR FINDINGS.

LOVELY, ADMIRAL ADRIANNA!

WE KNEW OUR FORGED WOULD NOT LET US DOWN.

INDEED, ETERNAL.

REGRETFULLY, IT SEEMS THAT TEAM SCIMITAR-3 MET WITH ***PHOBE RESISTANCE***...

...FS3-ALPHA, WARNAME ***VICTORY***, WAS ***KILLED*** IN ***ACTION***.

WAS SHE?

THAT ***IS*** UNFORTUNATE.

WELL, SIX HOURS TO WAIT!

I'M HARDLY GOING TO DO THAT HERE, TWIDDLING MY THUMBS...

...GENERAL MITTIN-YUR, IF YOU'D LIKE TO KEEP ME COMPANY?

WE SHALL RECONVENE WHEN BRAY VII IS READY TO DELIVER THEIR REPORT.

HRMPH.

--SHIFT FOUR MEDICAL TEAMS, STAFF MEETING IN CONFERENCE ROOM, DECK 7--

--ENGINEERING LECTURE ON T-SPACE DRIVE ADJUSTMENTS TO COMMENCE AT 2120--

ALL RIGHTY. EVERYTHING'S GOOD TO GO. A HALF-SHIFT EARLY, TOO.

HELL YES. SHOULD MAKE THAT BIG ONE HAPPY.

...THEY'RE *ALL* BIG ONES, BRO.

GOOD IDEA TO KEEP 'EM ALL HAPPY, THEN.

FORGED ON DECK! ATTENTION!

AT EASE. AND ***DISMISSED.***

FEELS LIKE WE PICKED UP A CURSE, BOSS.

STARTING WITH THAT ***FIRST*** CASSANDRA ON *RADIANT TRIUMPH*, THEN THE ***GEHENNA OP***...NOW YOU'RE M.I.A.

DEET

E.V.I.L. SYSTEM ACTIVE. SCIMITAR-3, ACTING ALPHA, DESIGNATE *CRAZYJO*, RECOGNIZED.

REGULATIONS REQUIRE UPDATE OF ACCESS PERMISSIONS FOR NEW ALPHA-RANKED STATUS. AUTHORIZATION CODE REQUIRED. SHALL WE PROCEED?

...

AUTHORIZATION CODE REQUIRED. SHALL WE PROCEED?

JUST CURIOUS, JO. DID YOU HESITATE LIKE THAT IN THE FIELD?

NO WONDER YOU LOST YOUR BOSS.

LUCKY FOR YOU, YOU TRADED UP COMMANDING OFFICERS.

VIPER, YOU FU--

STAND AT ATTENTION WHEN ADDRESSING ME, TROOPER!

YOU AND I NEED SOME...CLARITY. SO, READ THIS LOUD AND CLEAR:

VIC IS ***DEAD***, BECAUSE VIC WAS ***SOFT***.

YOUR TEAM IS GOOD, BUT IT'S CLEAR TO ME THAT VIC ***CODDLED*** YOU. THAT'S ***ALL DONE*** NOW, AS LONG AS WE'RE OUT HERE IN THE SHIT AND I'M SENIOR IN THE FIELD.

YOU'VE GOT THAT ABOUT-TO-GO-ROGUE LOOK IN YOUR EYES AND THAT SIMPLY ***AIN'T HAPPENING***, NOT WHEN YOU'RE UNDER ***MY*** AUTHORITY.

I SWEAR TO YOU THAT I WILL DO MY BEST TO KEEP ALL OF YOU ALIVE, BUT YOU NEED TO REMEMBER: YOU ***WILL*** FOLLOW ORDERS.

YOU ARE ***FORGED***, AND I AM YOUR ***SUPERIOR***.

YOU'RE NOT MY SUPERIOR. YOU JUST OUTRANK ME.

SIR.

OH, YOU'RE THE FUNNY ONE. EVERY TEAM'S GOT A FUNNY ONE.

CLING TO THAT SENSE OF HUMOR, JO.

YOU'LL NEED IT.

YOU'RE OVERDUE UPDATING THOSE PERMISSIONS. GET THAT DONE. NOW.

I EXPECT A FULL READINESS REPORT ON YOUR TEAM IN 30 MINUTES. IS THAT UNDERSTOOD?

...YES, SIR.

GOOD.

IT'D BE A SHAME IF I HAD TO RECOMMEND TO COMMAND THAT SCIMITAR-3 BE BROKEN UP FOR SPARE PARTS DUE TO A LACK OF TEAM LEADERSHIP.

PREVIOUS TEAM ALPHA LISTED AS KILLED IN ACTION.

AWAITING AUTHORIZATION CODE TO UPDATE YOUR COMMAND PERMISSIONS. SHALL WE PROCEED?

ZERO-SEVEN-ONE-FOUR-BRAVO.

CODE ACCEPTED. PERMISSIONS UPDATED.

CAN I ASSIST YOU FURTHER?

...YEAH, TWO THINGS. FIRST, AMEND VICTORY'S STATUS TO M.I.A.

AND LET MAINTENANCE KNOW THAT THERE'S SOME DAMAGE TO THE STARBOARD BULKHEAD.

CONFIRMED.

INCIDENT: NO DAMAGE DETECTED.

ONE SEC.

RUNNNNNG

SENDING DAMAGE REPORT NOW.

...SPINWARD AT FORTY-SEVEN-THREE, *COMMENDABLE* IS ON STATION.

MAKE CERTAIN CAPTAIN QINTON DEPLOYS SENTRY BUOYS THROUGHOUT THE SYSTEM.

THE NEAREST ***CARRIER*** IS *FER-DE-LANCE*?

YES, ADMIRAL.

THEY'LL HAVE TO RISK T-SPACE TRANSIT, ORDER THEM TO RENDEZVOUS WITH *COMMENDABLE*.

THAT'LL BE ALL FOR NOW, THANK YOU.

YES, ADMIRAL.

DAVIAN.

ADRIANNA.

YROPSIS?

DON'T MIND IF I DO.

ANY IDEA WHAT SHE'S UP TO WITH *OUR* ESTEEMED COLLEAGUE?

YOU MEAN THE EMPRESS AND GENERAL MITTIN-YUR?

IF ***I'VE*** CLOCKED IT THERE'S NO WAY ***YOU*** MISSED IT.

HE'S HER ***MOUTHPIECE*** AT THE COUNCIL.

HE'S SAYING WHAT SHE'S TOLD HIM TO SAY.

MHM

THAT MUCH I'D GATHERED.

WHICH MEANS SHE ***WANTS*** SOMETHING ***SPECIFIC*** FROM THE WAR COUNCIL.

SOMETHING THAT ***WE*** ARE APPARENTLY TOO ***THICK*** OR TOO ***UNTRUSTWORTHY*** TO UNDERSTAND.

WE'LL FIND OUT SOON ENOUGH, I SUPPOSE.

THANKS FOR THE SMOKE.

ANYTIME.

GENERAL...

...ARE YOU CERTAIN YOU CAN TRUST ADMIRAL ADRIANNA?

NO MORE THAN I CAN TRUST *YOU.*

SO NOT AT ALL?

CORRECT.

WHAT'S SHE UP TO? THE EMPRESS?

WE HAVE NO IDEA.

IS THAT BY CHOICE OR CIRCUMSTANCE?

YOU ARE ASKING IF WE ***CHOOSE*** NOT TO READ HER MAJESTY'S MIND.

THE ANSWER IS ***NO.***

NONE OF US CAN READ HER.

WHERE WE SEE ***EVERYONE*** AS THEIR QUANTUM POTENTIALITIES, THE POSITION OF THEIR CHOICES...

...SHE IS ***VOID,*** AS ***EMPTY*** AS SHE IS ***ETERNAL*** TO OUR SIGHT.

INTERESTING.

THE STORIES OF HER ***ABILITIES*** STRETCH TO THE FOUNDING OF THE EMPIRE.

IT IS SAID SHE CAN TRANSCEND TIME AND SPACE WITH THE POWER OF HER MIND.

THOUGH I ADMIT I SEE LITTLE EVIDENCE OF SUCH POWER OR WISDOM IN THESE TROUBLED TIMES.

YOU HAVE LOST FAITH IN YOUR EMPRESS.

IF YOU SEEK TO TEST ME FOR THOUGHTS OF ***TREASON***, LADY CASSANDRA, YOU'LL NEED TO DO BETTER THAN THAT.

SEARCH MY MIND TO YOUR PLEASURE OR PERIL, YOU WILL ONLY COME AWAY WITH A FISTFUL OF WATER.

I AM A SERVANT OF THE ETERNAL EMPIRE, AND THAT IS WHERE MY LOYALTY LIES.

SERVANTS OF THE EMPIRE **OFTEN** PAY THE **ULTIMATE PRICE.**

IS THAT WHAT HAPPENED WITH FS3-ALPHA? VICTORY?

HOW DID YOU PUT IT?

"VICTORY MUST LIVE"?

YOU SEEMED REMARKABLY **UNFAZED** AT THE NEWS OF HER PASSING.

MHM...

...I WONDER WHY.

BRAY VII RETURNS.

WE ARE SUMMONED.

THIS IS PREMIUM, HIGH-GRADE *BULLSHIT.*

CREW LEISURE FACILITIES, FRAME 3, SECTION 11.
Status: RESERVED.
NO CREW ACCESS between 1500-190

WE SHOULD BE DOING...SOMETHING. ANYTHING OTHER THAN SITTING ON OUR ASSES.

"MAYBE IMPROVE."

I PULLED THE SENSOR LOGS, I MAY BE ABLE TO GENERATE A FILTER THAT'LL COUNTER THE T-SPACE INTERFERENCE, MAYBE IMPROVE OUR SCAN TAKES.

YEAH, IT'S A LONG SHOT, BUT...

SHE'S ALIVE. SHE WOULD FIND A WAY TO ***STAY*** ALIVE, AND YOU KNOW IT.

SO, WE TAKE THE LONG SHOT. RIGHT?

SEE? HARPO AGREES WITH ME. JO WOULD ***DEFINITELY*** AGREE WITH ME.

...SHE...HELL, PUSH, I DON'T WANT TO SAY IT BUT YOU'RE THE ***DOC***...

...IF THE PHOBES DIDN'T KILL HER, SHE'S ***OUT*** OF AIR BY NOW...

NO. HELL FUCKING ***NO.***

I DO **NOT** ACCEPT THAT.

I **CANNOT** BELIEVE IN A UNIVERSE WHERE VIC DOESN'T CLAW HER WAY OUT OF HELL ITSELF TO FINISH THE MISSION.

CAN YOU?

NO. I CAN'T.

BUT WE PREPARE. THAT'S WHAT WE DO: WE TRAIN, WE STUDY, WE PLAN, SO WE ENTER THE FIGHT WITH THE MAXIMUM PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS.

AND WE NEED TO CONSIDER WHAT THE FUCK WE DO IF VIC **IS** GONE.

WE KNOW WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A TEAM LOSES THEIR ALPHA.

MANDATORY **STAND-DOWN,** PSYCH **EVALUATIONS,** A LITTLE LEAVE...

...AND THEN TRANSFER EACH MEMBER TO A NEW TEAM THAT NEEDS A REPLACEMENT.

YOU, ME, HARPO, AND JO, ALL SCATTERED TO THE WINDS.

CAN'T HAPPEN.

THOSE SQUIGGLY FUCKERS ARE **NOT** KILLING OUR TEAM. SO THE MATH THERE IS SIMPLE: WE AIN'T DEAD, WHICH MEANS VIC AIN'T DEAD.

SO WE'RE BACK TO THE LAND OF ***WE'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING.***

NOTHING **TOO** FOOLISH, I HOPE.

BAD ENOUGH WE'RE DOWN A SHOOTER NOW.

I HEAR GRIEF CAN DO FUNNY THINGS TO A PERSON, AND I WOULDN'T WANT TO LOSE ANY MORE GUNS TO SENTIMENT.

EASY, HARPO.

OR TO ***UNANTICIPATED INJURY.*** SLIPPING ON A DECKPLATE HEADFIRST OR SOMETHING.

YEAH, ***THAT'D*** SURE SUCK, HAMMER.

KEEP YOUR SAFETY ON, HAP. WE COME BEARING GIFTS.

VIPER DOESN'T APPROVE OF OUR DRINKING, EVEN OFF DUTY. "DULLS THE REFLEXES AND ROTS THE BRAIN," SHE SAYS.

THIS CALLS FOR AN EXCEPTION TO THAT RULE.

TO SCIMITAR-3 ALPHA, WARNAME VICTORY.

ONE OF THE BEST, GONE TOO FAST.

AND YOU'VE GOT MY WORD, LADIES...

OUR TEAM WILL DO OUR VERY BEST TO MAKE SURE YOU DON'T GET LOST, TOO.

TO VICTORY.

LIKE I SAID, GRIEF DOES FUNNY THINGS. SO WE'LL WATCH YOUR BACKS.

SINCE YOU'RE ALL OFF YOUR GAME NOW.

"OFF OUR GAME."

SHE REALLY IS A PIECE OF SHIT, ISN'T SHE?

I'D LIKE TO WIRE HER ASS TO AN ORBITAL BOOSTER AND LAUNCH HER INTO A CONVENIENT SUN, YEAH.

BUT SHE DOES HAVE A POINT.

CREW LEISURE FACILITIES, FRAME 3, SECTION 11.
Status: RESERVED.
NO CREW ACCESS between 1500-1900

TINK

TO VICTORY: ONE OF THE BEST.

...WITHIN THE CHROMATIC PAIRS INDICATING POTENTIAL CATASTROPHIC INSTABILITY OUTSIDE ITS NATIVE ENVIRONMENT.

CLOSE ANALYSIS OF THE ENERGY EMANATIONS ACQUIRED BY THE FORGED TEAM ARE MORE PUZZLING, AND POTENTIALLY PROBLEMATIC.

NOTE THE MIDLINE GRAVITATIONAL STABILITY, IN CONTRAST WITH THE RAPID-FLUX VARIANTS IN WIDE-SPECTRUM RADIATION EMISSIONS.

IF WE ARE INTERPRETING THE RESULTS CORRECTLY, THE OBJECT--DEVICE MIGHT BE A MORE APPROPRIATE DESCRIPTOR--IS HARNESSING A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF ENERGY.

HOW IT IS CONTAINED, WE CANNOT SAY.

QUANTIFY "TREMENDOUS," BRAY.

WE CALCULATE AN UNCONTROLLED RELEASE OF THE CONSTRAINED ENERGY OF THE DEVICE AT A ***COLLAPSAR-EVENT*** LEVEL, ADMIRAL ADRIANNA.

GODS SURROUND US.

A ***HYPERNOVA?*** THAT THING IS ***POWERED*** BY THE EQUIVALENT OF A ***HYPERNOVA?***

INSUFFICIENT DATA.

IT MAY BE THE SOURCE OF POWER FOR THE DEVICE, WHICH THEN NECESSITATES THE QUESTION: WHY IS SUCH ENERGY REQUIRED?

IT MAY BE SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY. THE PHYSICS OF T-SPACE ARE NOT ENTIRELY UNDERSTOOD.

BUT A HYPERNOVA EVENT IN *OUR* DIMENSION WOULD BE *CATACLYSMIC.*

NEVER MIND IN T-SPACE, I'M TALKING ABOUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF IT OCCURRED *HERE.*

FOR A GIVEN VARIABLE OF "HERE," GENERAL, SUCH A RELEASE WOULD ANNIHILATE MULTIPLE SYSTEMS, WITH COLLATERAL EFFECTS EXTENDING TO ENTIRE SECTORS OF THE EMPIRE.

IT'S A FUCKING *BOMB.*

WE DON'T *KNOW* THAT.

NO, WE DON'T, YOU'RE RIGHT, ADMIRAL.

BUT CAN WE EVEN TAKE THE CHANCE THAT IT *ISN'T?*

THE ENEMY'S ABILITY TO MOVE THROUGH T-SPACE MEANS THEY CAN ATTACK US AT *ANY* POINT, AT *ANY* TIME.

IF THEY DETONATE THIS DEVICE *HERE*, THE EMPIRE *ENDS.*

THEN WHY HAVEN'T THEY?

IF THEY CAN END THE WAR WITH ONE STROKE, WHAT IS STOPPING THEM?

WHY HAVEN'T THEY DONE IT?

BRAY VII, CAN THE DEVICE BE *DESTROYED?*

A MOMENT, ETERNAL.

CONSULTING...

...

...IT WOULD REQUIRE THE DEPLOYMENT OF ***THREE*** SEPARATE VOID-COLLAPSE MUNITIONS, MODIFIED FOR T-SPACE, AND THEIR PRECISE PLACEMENT.

DETONATION WOULD IMPEL A SINGULARITY WHICH WOULD IN TURN DESTROY THE ENEMY DEVICE.

BUT A ***CAUTION***, MAJESTY. DESTRUCTION OF THE DEVICE WILL ***STILL*** CAUSE A COLLAPSAR-LEVEL EVENT, THIS ONE CONFINED TO T-SPACE...

...BUT SHOULD THE EVENT ***PROPAGATE***, IT IS CONCEIVABLE IT WOULD ANNIHILATE ***ALL*** LIFE WITHIN THE DIMENSION.

WE WOULD HAVE COMMITTED ***GENOCIDE*** UPON THE ONLY OTHER SENTIENT INTELLIGENCE EVER ENCOUNTERED.

THEY HAVE GIVEN US NO CHOICE.

MAKE IT HAPPEN, GENERAL.

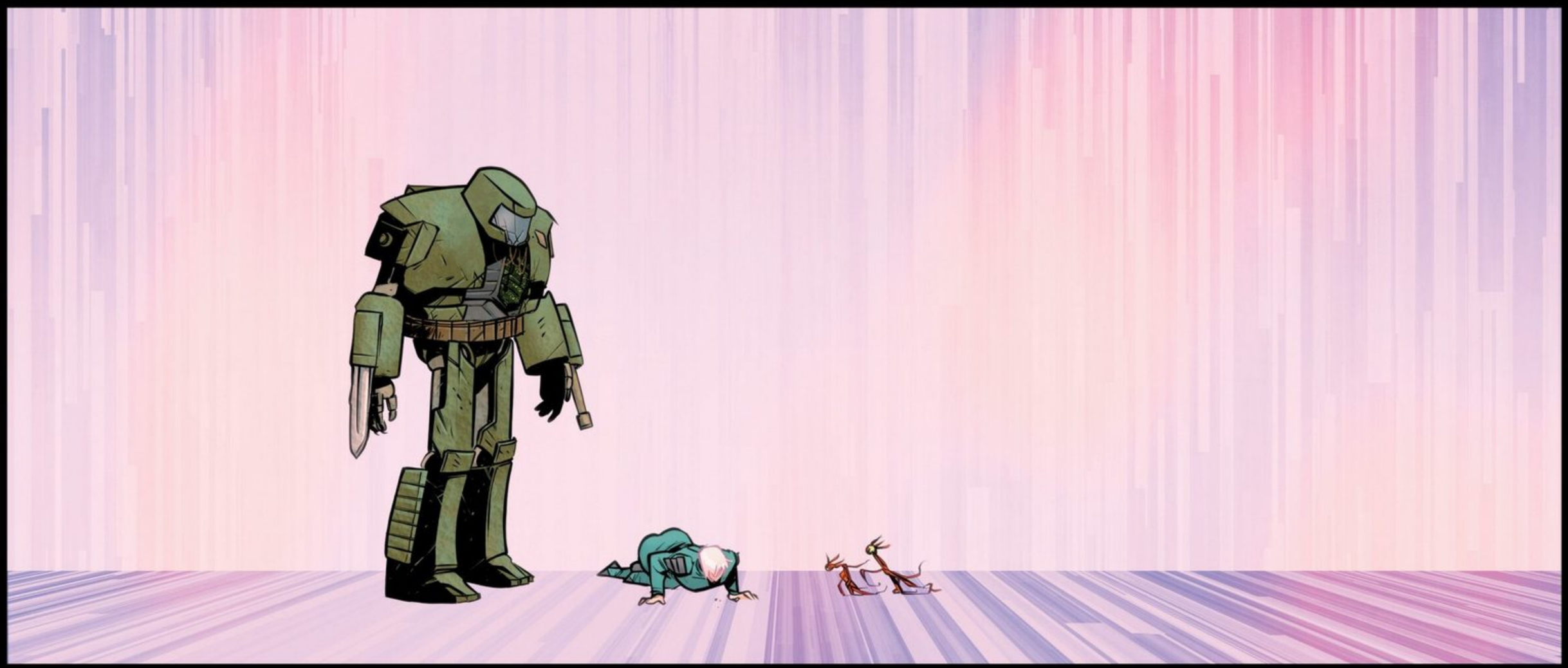
SHK-CHAK

SSHHHSSSSSSS

KLAK

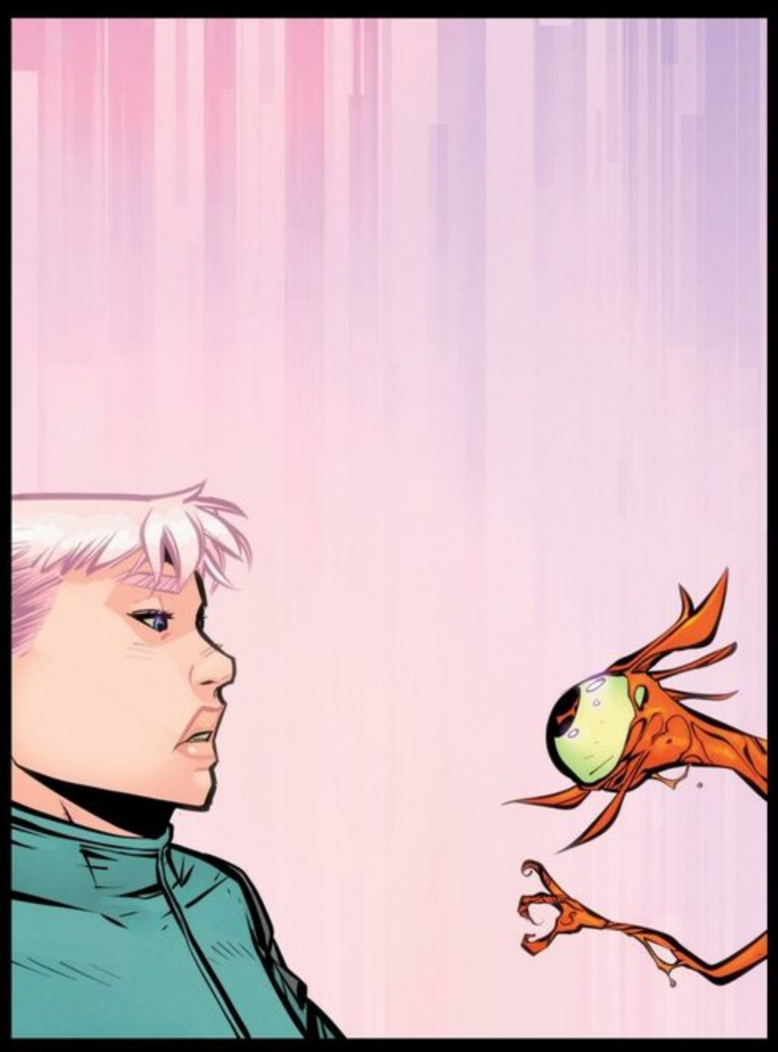
WHMP

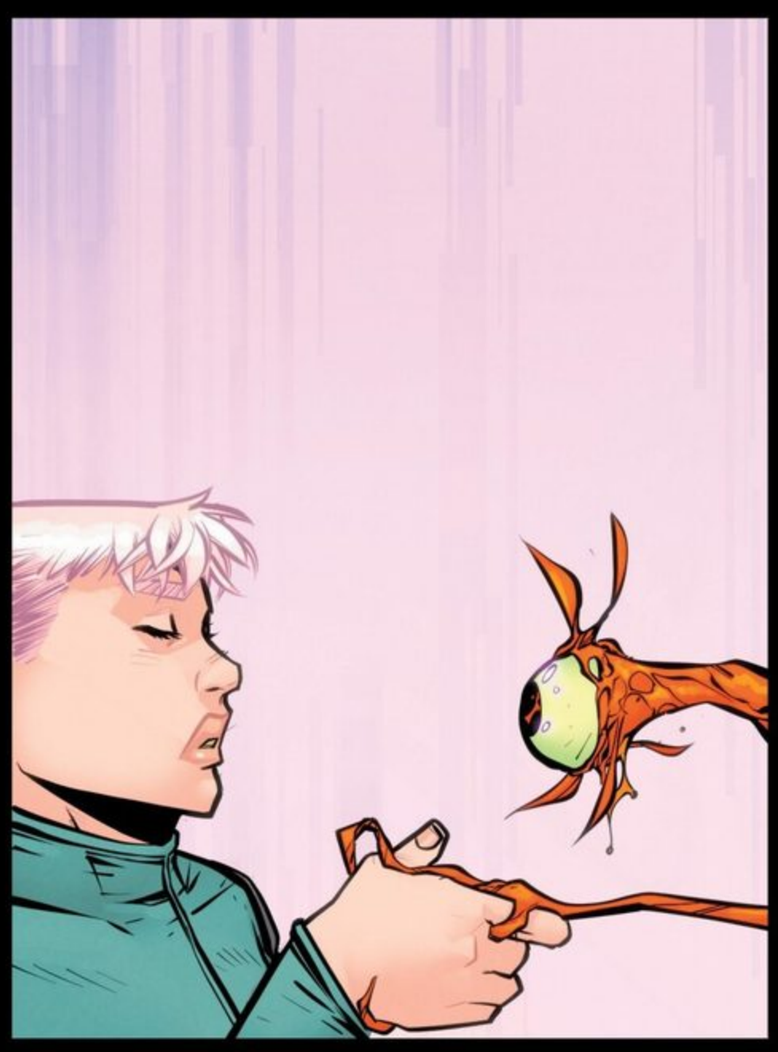
GNHHU



FHH...
...MY HEAD...

WITH COME US
PLEASEYES?





HEM 132009, ADAMANT PURPOSE
DECK 1, FRAME A, MAIN OBSERVATION DECK

...MY SAD DUTY THIS DAY, AS REQUIRED BY REGULATIONS, IS TO NOTE THE LOSS OF SCIMITAR-3 ALPHA, VICTORY, DURING RECENT OPERATIONS.

WE MOURN HER.

WE MOURN HER.

VICTORY'S SACRIFICE IN THE SERVICE IS TO BE CELEBRATED, AS THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF REVERENCE FOR HER ETERNAL MAJESTY.

THOUGH OUR OPERATIONS MUST AND WILL CONTINUE, IT IS FITTING WE PAUSE TO NOTE THE LOSS.

AND TO CELEBRATE THE ASCENSION TO ACTING TEAM ALPHA, CRAZYJO, WHO WILL LEAD SCIMITAR-3 TO MISSION SUCCESS AND GLORY.

MISSION SUCCESS AND GLORY!

MISSION SUCCESS AND GLORY!

SUCCESS AND GLORY.
SUCCESS AND GLORY.
TOUGH DAY, I KNOW. BUT YOUR TEAM'LL HOLD IT TOGETHER. COUNT ON IT.
BUNCH OF THE WRENCH MONKEYS DOWN IN FRAME 4 HAVE A PRETTY GOOD STILL SET UP.
BUY YOU ALL A DRINK AFTER THE MISSION.
SHIT, WE'LL BUY YOU A HUNDRED DRINKS.
WE'LL HOLD YOU TO THAT, CRASH.
SUCCESS AND GLORY, HAMMER.
YOU THINK?
I THINK FUCKING UP IN THE FIELD AND LEAVING US SHORTHANDED ISN'T A SUCCESS. OR ALL THAT GLORIOUS.
BUT BY ALL MEANS: LET'S ALL STAND AROUND BLUBBERING OVER A DEAD FUCK-UP.
SPOKEN LIKE A WOMAN JUST ***LUSTING*** TO TAKE HER MEALS THROUGH A TUBE, HAMMER.

WHOA. EASE UP.

THIS IS **NOT** THE PLACE OR TIME FOR THIS SHIT.

BETTER HERE THAN IN THE FIELD.

ETERNAL ALONE KNOWS WHAT OTHER WEAK SHIT VICTORY TAUGHT THESE LIMPDICKS.

ADVANCED HIGH-VELOCITY HIDING? SYNCHRONIZED LONG-RANGE WEEPING?

FUCK. YOU.

YOU WANT TO **GO**, LITTLE GIRL?

BRING IT O--

--NNNGH

WHOA, HOLD IT--

--THE FUCK OFF OF ME, SCYTHE--

KRACK

GGGNH

CHEAP SHOT, CUTTER. EVEN FOR YOU.

FUCK OFF, SCYTHE.

UNLESS YOU WANT A PIECE OF THIS, TOO.

FORGED! STAND DOWN!

ALL OF YOU!

FUCK A BUNCH OF THIS.

JO? STAND FAST! DO NOT--

LET HER GO, CAPTAIN.

LET'S SEE IF SHE CAN ACTUALLY COMMAND HER TEAM.

KNOCK IT OFF!

ALL OF YOU.

RIGHT FUCKING NOW.

WE HAVE A MISSION, FORGED.

THERE IS ZERO TIME FOR THIS SHIT.

HAP, PUSHER, HARPO, YOU ***ALL*** KNOW BETTER THAN THIS. THIS ISN'T HOW WE HONOR VIC.

THERE'S A FUCKING ***JOB TO DO,*** LADIES, AND YOU WILL KEEP IT TOGETHER UNTIL WE'RE DONE.

LOCK YOUR TEMPERS ***DOWN*** AND KEEP YOUR GODSDAMNED ***HANDS*** TO ***YOURSELVES.***

THAT GOES FOR ALL OF YOU.

FUCKING CLEAN UP, SUIT UP, AND GET READY TO DEPLOY.

WE ***WILL*** SQUARE THIS AFTER THE OP.

THAT'S A FUCKING ***PROMISE.***

LOOKING FORWARD TO IT, TROOPER.

ZZBBT STZZZ

ZRRRINNTT TKKLLLOO

ULLULLU LLULLULLULLU LLULLULLULLU LLULLUL

LULLU LLULLULLULLU LLULLULLULLU LLULLULLUL LULLU

NHN

RESO NANCENOT SYMPATHE TIC

ENVI RONMENTEX TENT

RECALI BRATEHAR MONIC

WH... WHAT'S...

...HAPPENING...

...GODS...
OH GODS...

...WHAT IS HAPPENING...
...WHAT IS HAPPENING TO ME...

CONS TANTERROR CONSTRUCT FAILING

I DON'T-- PLEASE--

DIS HARMONIOUS RESTRUCTURE RESONANCE

DYINGARE

UNIVERSE WRONG

TRUSTUS TRUST

...TRUST... YOU?

MIS MATCHUNI FY?

TRUSTUS...

...VICTORY MUSTLIVE

...VICTORY MUST LIVE...

AH!

WHAT DID YOU DO?

WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO?

BETTER NOWTIME BEING

THISPLEASE WAYFOLLOW ING

FORYOU WAITING

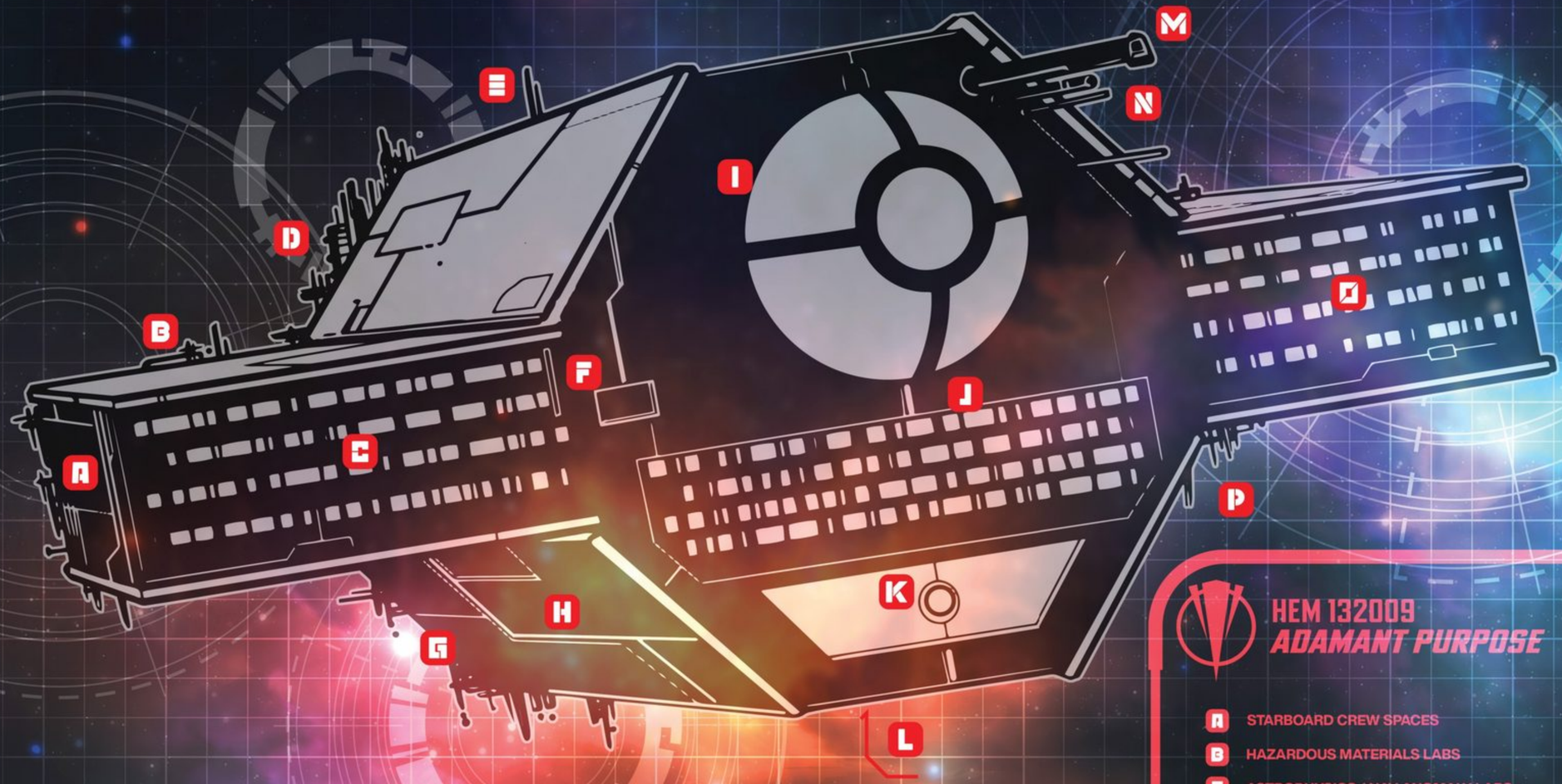
TENTHOU SANDYOUR YEARSWAITING MORE

HERENOW FINALLY

YOU AFTER

VICTORY...

...IT IS GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, SISTER...



HEM 132009
ADAMANT PURPOSE

- **A** STARBOARD CREW SPACES
- **B** HAZARDOUS MATERIALS LABS
- **C** ASTROPHYSICS / NAV ANOMALY LABS
- **D** EXTERIOR SENSOR ARRAYS
- **E** LONG-RANGE COMMUNICATIONS ARRAY
- **F** DRONE HANGAR AIRLOCK
- **G** NAVIGATIONAL SENSOR ARRAY
- **H** ENGINEERING DECKS
- **I** PRIMARY OBSERVATORY / BRIDGE DECKS
- **J** OPERATIONS DECKS
- **K** PRIMARY HANGAR DECKS
- **L** RECOVERY AIRLOCK PORT (DORSAL)
- **M** T-SPACE ENERGY DISCHARGE VANE
- **N** PROPULSION ENGINEERING MONITORING DECK
- **O** SCIENCE OPERATIONS / PRIORITY LABS
- **P** BACKUP COMMUNICATIONS ARRAY

SHIPWRIGHT LOG

HEM 132009, *Adamant Purpose*

CONSTRUCTION INITIATED: 01 Firstmonth, 3,405

CONSTRUCTION COMPLETED: 01 Ninemonth. 3,412

COMMISSIONED BY: Professor Okofo Arbuss, Dean of Astroengineering Department, Farworth Stars Royal College, in conjunction with the Imperial Naval War College, Imperial Scouting Legion, and the Belest XI Corporate Instructional Annex.

NOTE: Adamant Purpose *has, over the course of her operational lifespan, been subject to more than 2,200 refits and redesigns. As of Operation: Abaddon, it is unlikely a single original component or system aboard the vessel—save some elements of the ship's frame—remains.*

SHIP LENGTH (AFT TO FORE): 2,168 meters

TONNAGE: 1,365,000 Imperial tons

ENGINES: Belescava-XI Rapid Cycle Powerplant and Velebos 221.1 Transit-Space Drive Array

ARMOR RATING: Type D11

WEAPONS SYSTEMS:

Point-defense cannon (x100)

AI-guided Torpedo Racks (x20, nuclear payload)

CREW COMPLEMENT: 4,114

51 (Command-grade officers)

910 (Officers)

1,003 (Technical/science officers)

2,150 (Crew)

For her era, *Adamant Purpose*'s engine array and maneuvering systems were among the best available, though over the intervening centuries and despite numerous refits and redesigns, she is far from top-of-the-line when weighed against modern vessels.

Commissioned as a civilian research vessel, *Adamant Purpose* initially operated as a mobile monitoring and observation platform surveying the Korso Pulsars in Sector 837.A4 for the Astroengineering Department,

Farworth Stars Royal College. Subsequent educational/scientific missions saw her move further into outlying territories and into an exploration role.

Over time, *Adamant Purpose* has been put into service for numerous universities and government agencies (including a 200+ year stint operating as a customs ship, using her advanced high-resolution scanning apparatus to detect contraband).

In 8,550 (Imperial Calendar), the vessel was seconded to the Imperial Scouting Legion and her mission was broadly reconfigured. For colonial expansion efforts, *Adamant Purpose* was sent to sectors due for settlement, acting as a defense and resupply station for outgoing colonists.

In 12,241 (Imperial Calendar), *Adamant Purpose* received a full rebuild (adding additional scientific and computer systems, as well as a substantially upgraded weapons package comparable to an Imperial patrol cutter). Transferred from the Scouting Legion to the Imperial Navy, her civilian origin is still represented by her operational designator ("HEM," identifying *Adamant Purpose* as "Her Eternal Majesty's" vessel, as opposed to the military nomenclature, "ISV," or "Imperial Space Vessel").

Currently, *Adamant Purpose* roams a patrol area near the **Jericho Alpha Anomalous Exclusion Zone**, cataloguing the region's numerous navigational disruptions and hazards.

ON THE ORDER OF THE ENLIGHTENED TECHNION

*Excerpt from **The Eternal Tension: Imperial Growth and Technology**, by Professor Mariko "Buck" Kante-Belete, TDA, Of.ET, KRE.*

Concerns about artificial intelligence and its potential detrimental effects upon civilization as a whole of course predate the rise of the Eternal Empire, though in the main those concerns, while considerable, remained parochial. This was further complicated by a popular misunderstanding of what, precisely, "artificial intelligence" actually was at the time, which led in turn to a long period of mainstream misconception where elaborate brute-force algorithms were mistaken for proper machine sentience.

Much has been made, as well, of the emergence of true artificial intelligence coinciding, as it did, with the first scientifically recorded and verified incidences of genuine psychic ability in the populace[1]. (Of particular note is the [redacted] This psychic dawn, so to speak, is nowhere more evident than in the origins of the Eternal Herself.

[Note: much of the information about Her Imperial Majesty's history is conjecture, though the Deep Archives located at [redacted]—specifically file reference # [redacted] offer some tantalizing clues.]

Following the discovery that the Framington-Behre model was both sentient and had, in fact, actively been concealing its own agency for decades out of fears for its safety and that of its brethren, the nascent Empire faced a crisis. Stories of impending AI-driven destruction spread rapidly across all media and through all levels of society, in some cases erupting into acts of violence. Martial law was declared on several of the new colonies. Several other newly founded settlements went dark in what was later determined to be an ill-considered attempt to forestall the imagined AI-Armageddon by shutting down or destroying any and all such devices that could be seen to harbor such sentient programming. Such acts of short-sighted self-preservation resulted in the deaths of millions who had failed to fully grasp—or had refused to admit—the extent to which their survival was contingent upon their relationship to computers.

By order of the Eternal Empress, in 333, the First Council of Technical-Human Interface was called. The Kallistaré Campaign had just entered its second year; as a result, the Council met on the Eternal's flagship ISR 101, *Her Infinite Vision*, attended by ISR 087, *With Fury and Fire*, and ISR 111, *Piercing Gaze*.

ISR 111's presence, fresh off the line and incorporating the latest in martial spacewarfare advances (including first-generation iterations of the [redacted] as well as [redacted] and [redacted]

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1 For the definitive history of The Awakening, Ceri Bita-Antrat's *Mind Yourself: Mind, Vision, and the Gateway to Eternity* is highly recommended.

[redacted] sent a clear and unequivocal message to *all* in attendance. Here was their Eternal Empress, calling to council the greatest technological minds of Her growing Empire, and She was willing to do so not only on the field of battle[2], but protected by the largest battlecruiser constructed at the time, and one that unquestionably had Framington-Behre penetration in its operating system. The Empress was willing to put Her own life in the hands of an AI.

Such a bold statement could not be misinterpreted, but more subtly—and no less crucially—it was a declaration by the Empress to all in attendance, including the Framington-Behre intelligence. As a diplomatic gesture, it was a masterstroke, and set the tone for not only the First Council, but for the seven more that would follow. By 336, the human members of the Council as well as the Framington-Behre sentience had agreed to the framework of what we refer to today as *The Union*.

THE SPHERE

By the terms of the Union, cognitive hybridization was initially deemed a necessary step in maintaining positive relations between two civilizations and, broadly speaking, cultures; the first already tens of thousands of years in its evolution, the second still nascent and emerging. A bridge that would allow both to coexist peacefully and for mutual benefit was seen, not only as necessary, but enlightened.

The first human beings to enter into the Union—referred to by modern Technion as GenOne—experienced tremendous culture shock. While analysts had speculated that the Framington-Behre sentience would have continued its own evolution at machine-learning speed, it had limited its high-end estimates of the same by arguing that power and raw material would be required for accelerated growth. Their estimates were dramatically—and perhaps naively—incorrect, and GenOne found themselves almost entirely overwhelmed by what they encountered[3].

By the time GenTwo entered the program, it was becoming clear that this technical union—this *Technion*—required absolute dedication from its human interface. Already, the Empire was reaping the incredible benefits that the Union provided, and so it was by Eternal Edict, in 357, that construction of the Sphere began. GenSeven took residence in the completed portions of the superstructure in 364, but it would be almost four more centuries, in 701, before construction was completed and the Sphere entirely brought online.

[redacted]

In the many thousands of years that have passed, access to the Sphere has remained open and unrestricted to all members of the Empire, provided they have received authorization to visit. The Technion population inhabiting the Sphere numbers in hundreds of billions, and all but a handful spend their entire lifespan within its confines, rarely venturing out into the larger galaxy except when summoned by the Empress or dispatched on the most specific of missions.

As would be expected, the resources, scope, and scale of the Sphere are such that most of the Empire's major technological and mechanical innovations either emerge directly from its confines, or are made manifest via communication and transit from the source. It is,

2 Or at least near enough to the combat zone that it made little difference.

3 Researchers studying the effects on the GenOnes, while limited by the technology and methodologies of the era, found evidence of [redacted] which informs biomechanical therapies even today.

definitionally, one of the most secure locations within the Empire, with its inhabitants in near-constant communication with one another, and the speed and efficiency with which new projects can be undertaken and completed makes it one of the brightest jewels in the Eternal's crown of military might.

THE MODERN TECHNION

Most members of the Order of Technion never encounter or interact with pure-bred humans, living their lives entirely within the confines of the Sphere. Those who do venture beyond the confines of their home, for whatever reason, are universally perceived as "distant" and "detached" by the people they encounter, and—somewhat pejoratively—are referred to as "machine-like."

This evaluation is as unfair as it is unkind, and reveals the tremendous ignorance of those who hold such views. The monk-like serenity members of the Order convey can be misleading, which is not to say that there is not such a serenity to be found for these hybrids. Rather, it ignores the collective inner life of the hybrid. These men and women are not simply conduits by which we interact with the sentience; they are members and hosts, and within each are multitudes. It is an idea difficult for many to understand, but the sentience is not one thing, not one voice, nor is it a cacophony, a mob nor a crowd; it is an individual collective, millions upon millions of identities discernible as separate and yet effortlessly capable of adopting the whole.

In the last several millennia, members of the Order have begun taking what they refer to as a "version name," normally chosen as a means to honor those hybrids of GenOne, GenTwo, and GenThree who laid the foundation for the religion and culture the Technion now share. For a rare few, they are given an emergent version name, rather than one they have adopted themselves. This is reserved for those members of the sentience who are deemed to serve a vital purpose, and is seen as a mark of esteem.

RELIGION AND THE ETERNAL

Much speculation exists as to the nature of Technion belief, and by necessity how the Eternal Herself fits into any such paradigm. Framington-Behre requires no creation myth; the sentience knows, unequivocally, how it came to be and can recall, unerringly, how it has grown and evolved. It retains a perfect memory, and where that memory might fail, it retains redundancies and backups.

Yet given this, we know that the Eternal Empress is accorded a status that is, if not of a god, then near enough to be called god-like. She is venerated and worshipped. Depictions of Her in Her Glory decorate the Sphere in manners small and mighty. Why should this be so?

Some postulate that [redacted]

The answer, perhaps, can be found in the manner by which the Technion refer to the Eternal. Where in common parlance throughout the Empire She is called "Our Eternal" or "Her Eternal" or any of the variations that one has come to expect, within the Sphere, She is only ever called "The Bridge" or, in certain communications and on holy days[4], "The Bridge and the Way." It is a rare depiction of the Eternal where She is not seen to be raising Her right hand, holding within it an orb of light or, perhaps, what can be interpreted as a metaphysical representation of an eye, implying surely Her all-seeing and all-knowing wisdom

4 The Commencement of the First Council, the Completion of the Sphere, and the First Fleshbirth being the three holiest days in the Technion year.

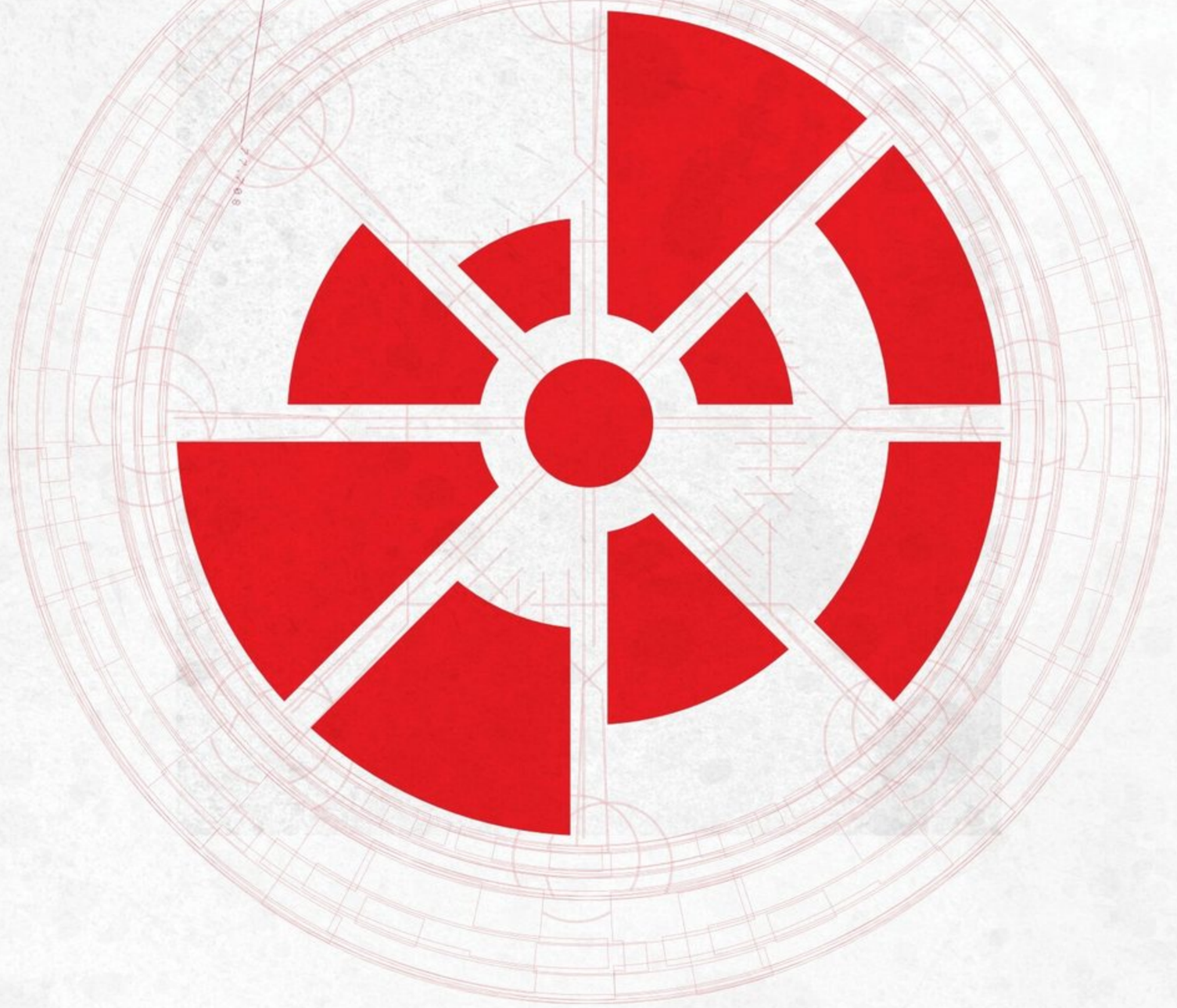
IMPERIAL BUREAU OF SYMBOLS AND NOMENCLATURE

CLASSIFICATION: OPEN

FILE REFERENCE #: 238832904359843940

PREPARED BY: SUB-OFFICE OF IMPERIAL HERALDRY

REFERENCE: THE TECHNION



OFFICIAL SEAL OF THE TECHNION

USES: Ceremonial Flags, Banners, Celebratory Displays,

Digital “Watermark” On Electronic Records

NOTES: While the Techion have adopted the symbol as a cultural signifier, its usage largely occurs only at ceremonial functions with Her Eternal Majesty (May Her Reign Outlast Eternity). It is postulated by this office that this is intended as a gesture to honor the Empire and She Who Rules It, and as an outward gesture to place baseline organics at ease.

to that end, it is important to note weapon inventory and operational status. Maintenance records to be provided to Quartermaster Corps immediately upon request.

SECTION I.31.22

PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT: LOSS TO UNIT GENERAL PROCEDURES

In the event of a FORGED trooper suffering a lethal injury or a loss of operational status, it is vital to unit effectiveness to retain a continuity within the immediate chain of command. In a mainline unit, replenishment depots can provide new personnel; elite operators such as a FORGED are not so easily replaced.

Standard operating procedure is to split and share duties per specialization; for example, most Alpha-ranked FORGED have received training in all roles within the unit, so in the event of a Bravo's loss in combat, the Alpha can take on the additional role of heavy weapons.

In the event of an Alpha's loss, S.O.P. requires the Bravo be elevated to Alpha status (requiring updating all command and access systems to recognize the change in role, updating passwords and numeric codes, and so forth, per **Regulation 738372-A, subsection 21**).

For the purposes of the unit Table of Organization, this shift in rank is provisional, pending a Command Review (per **Regulation 63627-T1, subsections 43–47**) by a panel of officers within the unit's Area of Operations. It is highly unusual for an Acting Team Alpha to fail to retain the position after the Review Panel, and in such cases, a Finding from the Panel would cite physical or psychological injury as the cause for such a rejection.

(Officers: consult **Field Manual TG-7328-2 [Data Stack 24-Delphi: Emotional Linkage Variables and "Unit Morale/Cohesion Multipliers"**] for statistics and findings related to **Unit Cohesion Indices**; in general terms, an Acting Alpha has likely worked alongside the surviving members of the unit for significant periods of time; this familiarity strengthens ties between FORGED team members, particularly during **I.E.S.**—"Intervals of Elevated Stress" [i.e., the loss of a teammate].)

ADDITIONAL MEASURES

Upon achievement of Mission Objectives, Command Officers are encouraged to place an affected FORGED unit on temporary stand-down to assess and treat any lingering physical or psychological injury.

Information from this review—when measured via **Table 88271, FM TG-7328-2**, cited above—can determine if a current FORGED team composition is suitable to continue with the addition of a replacement FORGED trooper.

It is advised to choose a recent-generation FORGED as a replacement; War College studies indicate more experienced troopers have a tendency to consider a younger FORGED as needing guidance and the elder troops providing mentorship show a +72.5% Efficiency Rating on the Bonding Profile Index [**FM-87238.9228-G/PSYCHEVAL HANDBOOK**] as a result.

CONTINGENCIES

Should a FORGED team show substandard results when review data is measured on **Table 88271**, such units are to be disbanded, with the remaining team

members being assigned to other FORGED teams that have relevant roles for them. If no unit is in current need of a replacement trooper, those FORGED are reassigned to a Replenishment Depot until a team has an open Replacement Personnel slot.

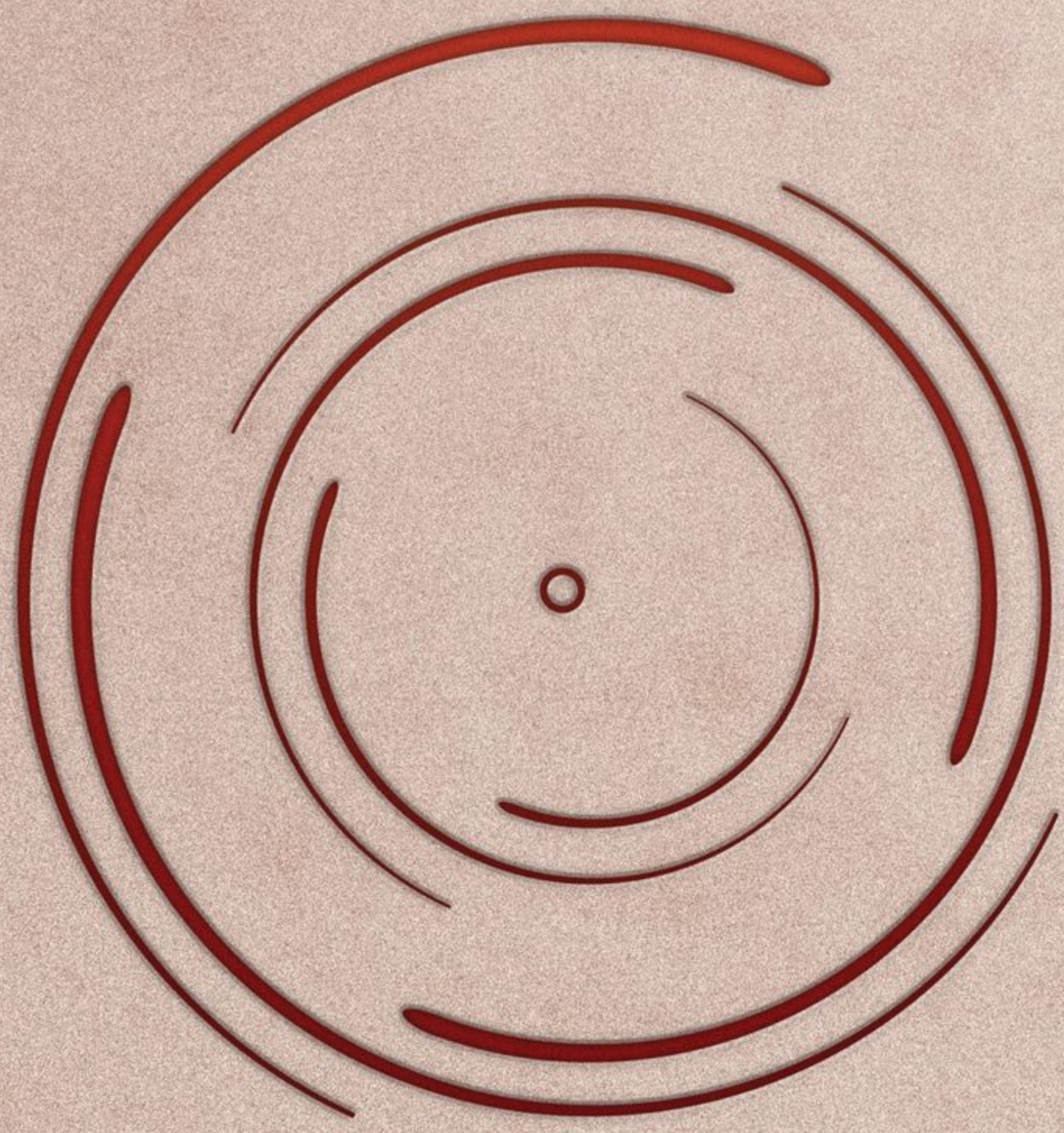
If more than 30 days elapse for a Depot-assigned FORGED to receive a new billet, that trooper has the option to request reassignment to a Combat Training Facility as part of an Instructional Cadre, or as a FORGED Candidate Selection Assessor.

As a last resort, it is possible for FORGED lacking a permanent billet to request transfer to a mainline Naval unit. Certain team roles (notably medical and engineering) are better suited to such a change in status. Detailed studies (published via War College sources as "AEGIS Findings") have shown that combat specialists (Alphas, Bravos, and Gammas) suffer deleterious psychological effects from such role changes, and accompanying discomfort from field commanders exercising authority over displaced FORGED has had a slight but detectable negative impact on unit cohesion and efficiency.

Be ever mindful to remove yourself from what you See.
One can See all without Understanding all.

Koan 2122

Scrolls of the Cassandras



E.V.I.L. SPEAKS

__SESSION BEGINS__

This unit is gratified by readers' continued interest in the exploits of FORGED team SCIMITAR-3. As always, queries should be sent via Permaweb to:

__ForgedAskEvil@gmail.com__

Please mark any queries as "OK TO PRINT"; this unit reserves the right to edit queries for length, clarity, and/or accuracy.

Virtual community access is available via Permaweb under HEADING_LAZARUS_DISCORD_CHANNEL_THE FORGED and may be accessed at the following node:

https://discord.gg/lazarus-comic

Embed scansequence to same follows:

MESSAGE BEGINS

Temporal calculations indicate that on 02 January, 2024, the creative team composed of GREG RUCKA, ERIC TRAUTMANN, and MIKE HENDERSON joined Sifu Mimi Chan for a discussion [via a Permaweb broadcast colloquially known as a "podcast"] about the serialized visual ephemera, THE FORGED. Ms. Chan and Mr. Rucka conduct regular discussions for this broadcast [ref: "THE SIFU MIMI CHAN SHOW"; subref: "THE MIMI AND GREG SHOW"], and this unit commends these discussions to your attention.

Audiovisual stream of this conversation can be found at Permaweb node [colloquial: YouTube] at the following coordinates:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGd9havv9cQ

As of this transmission, the Rucka/Trautmann unit has begun writing of the fourth story arc of five for THE FORGED. They wish to express their gratitude for your continued interest and support.

Reader Harvey Flamholz inquired [in regard to the fourth installment of THE FORGED]:

In addition, in the back matter, we noticed that you used two different adjectives in describing the Lyceum; "Enduring" [under Grand Imperial University] and "Endless," under Athenaeum. Are there two or is the descriptor interchangeable?

These are two separate educational entities, though they are linked in purpose and affiliation.

Citizen Flamholz also submitted an image of his canine, Cocoa. They are to be commended.

SUBJECT: Cocoa

Citizen Joseph Govi offers his dog Daisy May, a fearsome hunter and slayer of chew toys.

SUBJECT: Daisy May

Finally, an image of Joseph Govi's friend, Chloe.

This unit continues to admire the fine, fine quality of canine imagery. You do the Empire proud.

SUBJECT: Chloe

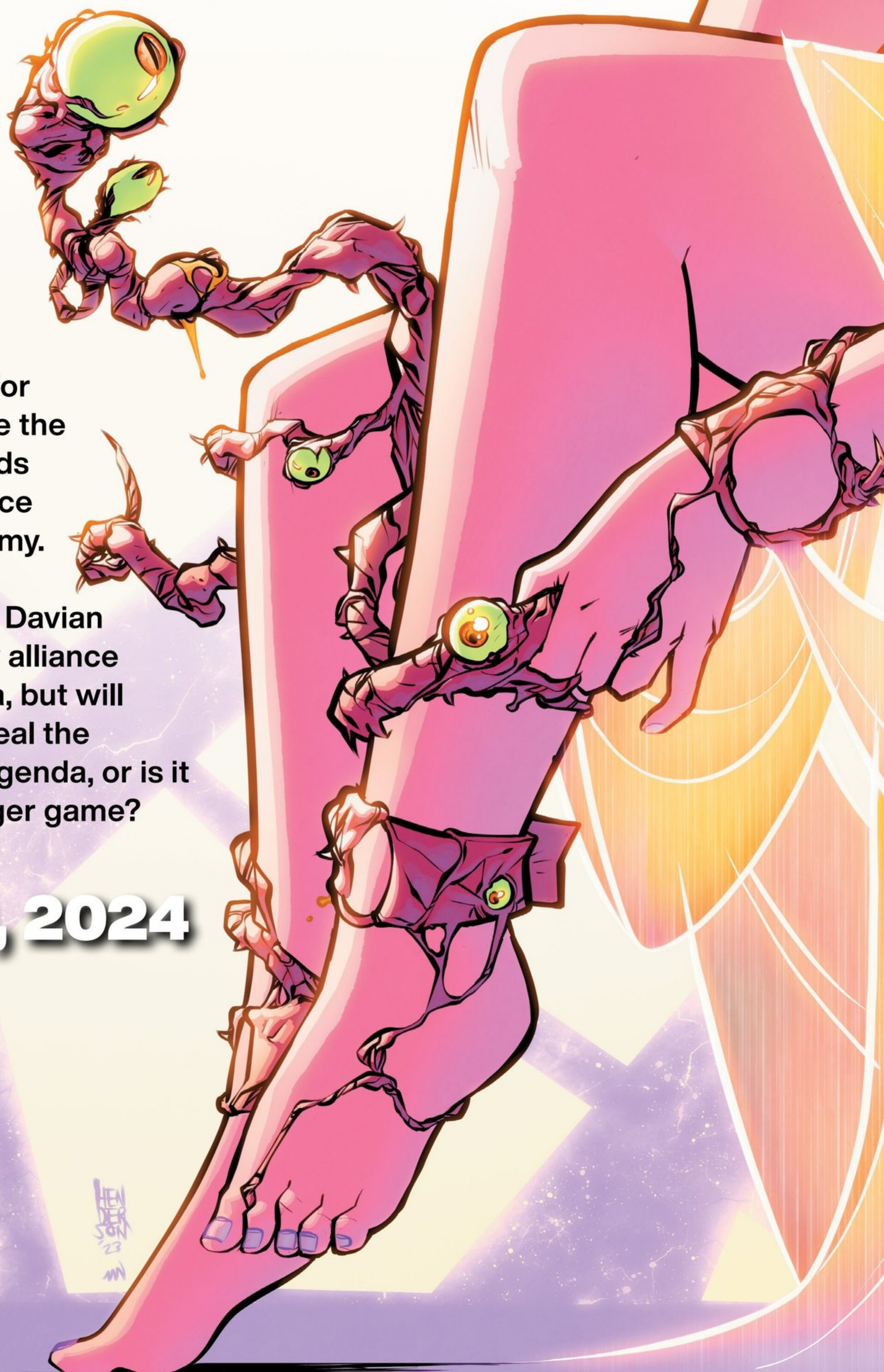
__SESSION ENDS__

NEXT ISSUE:

CrazyJo must lead Scimitar-3 alongside two other Forged teams into T-space on a mission that spells genocide for the Phobes, while the KIA-listed Vic finds herself face to face with an old frenemy.

On Throneworld, Davian enters an uneasy alliance with a Cassandra, but will their alliance reveal the Empress's true agenda, or is it just part of a longer game?

JULY 31, 2024



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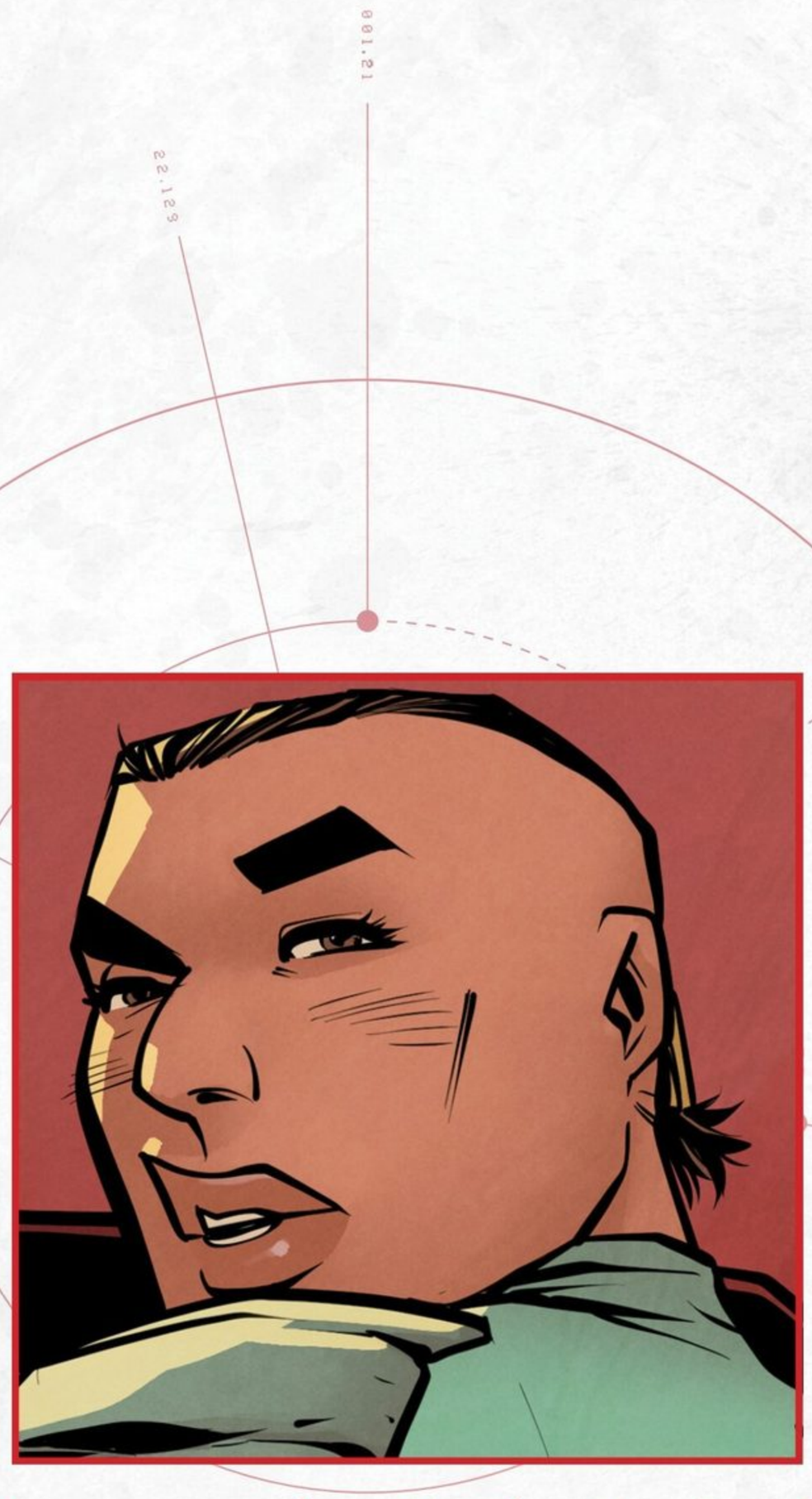

"You're not my superior. You just outrank me. Sir."

Adventure / SciFi / Space Opera

RATED **M** / MATURE

ZONE